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THE PLAYGROUND FOR CHILDREN AT HOME

BY BEULAH KENNARD,

President Pittsburgh Playground Association, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Constructive philanthropy must set the child in the midst of all its reasoning and planning. In the child alone is inspiration and hope for those who are weary of our present patchwork methods of social progress, for those who look for a better time when decisive victories shall be gained over the causes of dependence, degeneration and crime, and when the present discouraging struggle with effects shall end.

In communities where bad housing, bad food, bad labor conditions, bad recreational conditions and bad social and political ethics are allowed to exist, the child in the midst of these things has no reasonable chance to grow into a normal healthy member of society. All social effort must look toward radical changes in these conditions if it would be effective. Neglect of them is as stupid as a fight against typhoid fever or tuberculosis, while water and air remain polluted.

One of the most fundamental defects in our public policy, until a very recent time, has been the lack of provision for play in the modern town and city. Now, however, a wave of enthusiasm is sweeping over the country and playgrounds are being opened in many places. Indeed they are becoming a factor in the betterment of families and neighborhoods that have become subnormal as a result of bad social conditions in general. When properly handled, playgrounds have given splendid service and have helped to solve many home and neighborhood problems, but when managed without intelligence and proper supervision, they have done nothing of the kind.

It requires but little investigation to see that many of the children in the congested sections of our towns and cities are below the average height and weight, have physical defects of sight, hearing and breathing, and are of low average scholarship and high average delinquency. Examination of the family life of these

children shows that, as a result of overcrowding and lack of family privacy, of long hours of labor and the pressure of modern industrial life, parents are unable to give their children the necessary care and attention, that the physical surroundings do not make for health and vigor, that the opportunities for the development of latent mental powers are wanting, and that there is little incentive for self-control or for the cultivation of moral strength. The excitement and the social advantages of the city streets are much more attractive to such children than are the dull crowded living rooms. In the case of immigrant families, the unaccustomed language and manner of living makes the parents still less able to cope with their self-assertive, Americanized children. Far too early the latter slip away from home to find their social life and recreation in the street. The street, aimless, distracting, good natured, not always vicious but always unstable and volatile, becomes their school of life. The street is the greatest disintegrating force in our modern civilization, yet children are turned loose upon it without other guide or restraint than their own undisciplined wills.

The children of the city streets may be roughly divided into two classes: the negative type, which lacks initiative, is conventional, timid, weak, and often anæmic physically and mentally; and the positive type, having initiative, vitality, daring imagination and strong will with an impatience of restraint. The former is unquestionably providing the material for the next generation of "under dogs," to be used, led and exploited by their more energetic fellows, to suffer injustice and deprivation, to go down before the first blast of serious misfortune and recruit the helpless and unhelpable. Beginning with a natural handicap, their burden of disability is constantly increased by a formless, stupid environment which provides no stimulus to endeavor, no challenge to the will, no opportunity for initiative, and no food for the imagination. Those in the smaller class who have excess energy, courage and will power sometimes rise above their surroundings, forge ahead in school and become skilled workmen and leaders. But unfortunately for these, also, the careless spirit of the street has its enticing charm, and their social supremacy in the gang draws them into political life rather than into productive work. The temptations to law breaking and excess are so many, and the legitimate amusements and

avenue for the expenditure of energy are so few that the juvenile court often receives the brightest of them before they are fairly started in life.

With both of these classes of children, the public school has been struggling with a growing sense of ineffectiveness. Our American school system was not designed to remedy the defects of homes and neighborhoods. Its methods are at present too formal and its machinery too limited, for successful character building, and it does not at all satisfy the child's social instincts. Moreover, its training is competitive and individualistic, with no provision for the social education which is so essential to modern life that for lack of it our overstrained commercial system is breaking down. The more alert among our teachers and superintendents realize that some radical changes in our schools must take place before they are capable of giving adequate service to socially impoverished communities.

In the meantime the playground has been called upon to supplement the schools, sometimes working with the educational forces, at other times, quite independent of them. In more than three hundred cities and in many towns and villages, more or less supervised playgrounds are now maintained. In spite of its popularity, however, the playground idea is far from being reduced to a satisfactory working plan. Some cities are even suffering a reaction from their first enthusiasm because the glowing pictures of happy, well-behaved children thronging these play centers have not always been realized. Until some of the pleasing superstitions concerning children are dissipated these ideals never will be realized, yet understanding will come slowly for there is nothing harder to change than a mistaken sentiment. One set of superstitions is concerned with the nature of children and the other with the nature of play, but both are opposed or indifferent to properly supervised and directed playgrounds.

"All children are good," say the sentimentalists, "except," after a few bitter experiences, "the naturally depraved and bad." This is a modern version of the older doctrine of infantile depravity. They ignore the facts patent to parents and teachers, that the moral sense of children is rudimentary and their ethics chaotic, that so far from having fixed notions of right and wrong, they are gradually forming their ideals from the examples nearest them.

The friendships and occupations of children, particularly their plays, should be watched with unceasing vigilance, for by these are their moral notions defined and their character fixed. In the case of children who lack proper home training, the need for care is evidently much greater.

Another sentiment often expressed is that children are more natural and joyous in their play if let alone. Any mother should know that this is not true, that children love no playfellow so well as one of a larger growth, and if they do not ask us to join their games, it is because we are not good playfellows. The need and the desire for help is painfully obvious among children of lower vitality and social development. Those with dwarfed imagination and little initiative do not know what to do with themselves even when provided with play apparatus and they cannot associate with other children without jealousy, self-seeking and quarreling. The small number of games known to street children of to-day is a constant surprise to those associated with them. The games which they do play, require little skill and less organization. The older ones who should be ready for team play cannot keep together through the simplest ball game unless they are fortunate enough to have among them a natural leader who can exercise a wholesome authority similar to the iron rule and personal supremacy of the ward boss.

If we had no other evidence than that of attendance, we should know that the supervised playground is more popular as well as more effective than that on which the children are allowed to "gambol like the lambs." In one city the directors in charge of certain playgrounds have objected to the admission of children under the leadership of members of the local "guild of play" because, as soon as these groups begin their games, the other children forsake all else and wish to join the personally conducted party.

When city and town playgrounds were first proposed, they seemed to present a very simple problem, almost too simple to be treated seriously. If children who lacked a place to play were given the space and a small amount of play apparatus, they would play; yet I have seen a well-equipped playground deserted on a bright summer morning while the children swarmed in the alleys and sat upon the curbstone outside. Again, I have seen playgrounds quite dominated by the rougher element in a neighborhood while the

weaker and more timid children stood around as helpless and inactive as they would have been in the street.

The modern phrase used by those dealing with the problems of organized philanthropy is "adequate treatment." Let us strive for the same adequacy in our playgrounds and see wherein they are deficient, if they have not come up to our expectations. All endeavor to deal with the human spirit must be compounded of two elements in about equal proportions—personality and brains. In the playground which gathers unto itself the sensitive, open and responsive souls of children, these two elements are fundamentally necessary. Machinery cannot take the place of character here any better than it can in the church, the school or the reformatory.

The success of any playground depends, firstly and lastly, upon its directors. You can build a playground around a good director if you have nothing but a lamp-post for equipment, while you will have inertia and discord, even vice, upon the most extravagantly equipped playground without adequate and efficient direction. We are not restoring country conditions to the children for whom we fence off a town lot on which they may play. The town or city playground is an artificial child garden with all kinds of difficulties and dangers on the other side of the fence, unnatural conditions from which we must protect our children as we would nurture the house or garden flowers which might have been safely left to themselves in their native woods. We have not escaped from the street or destroyed its influence by fencing off these children's corners, but we have hemmed the wayward spirit within such bounds that it may be dealt with, if we are able.

It is not enough for us merely to defend the children from physical or moral dangers; the time is long past when a playground should be considered in this negative fashion. By carefully directed and organized play, we can build character, develop individuality and give a sound education in social ethics, which will counteract the spirit of the street better than any other agency we could devise.

Under proper leadership, competitive games and "stunts" will arouse the ambition of the indolent and encourage the timid, constructive play will awaken the desire to make things and arouse the instinct of workmanship; dramatic play will appeal to the imagination; and team play will give the bolder spirits a chance while it restrains, by the democratic rules of the game, any bullying or

arbitrary government. This kind of efficient service cannot, however, be given by untrained or half-trained directors that are required to regulate the activities of large numbers of children of all ages and both sexes at the same time. The play director should not be a nurse, or a matron, or a policeman—he is there not to watch the children's games but to lead them.

Classification is as necessary in a city or large town playground as in a large school. In the country village an ungraded playground or school may be successful because of the small numbers, the children separate naturally into groups and the boys and girls play their own games while the little children may receive the major part of a director's attention. In a large playground, each general division should have its own play leader. The little ones need a kindergartner, or at least a woman who has had some kindergarten training, who can sing children's songs and play children's games, tell stories and provide simple occupation for little fingers. In some cities, these little ones are much neglected and, having no special play leader, they do not play many of the games suitable to their age, but dig rather aimlessly in the sand, swing or see-saw for a time and then either stand around watching, or wander away to get into mischief.

The older boys need a man, virile, resourceful, uncompromising, yet sympathetic, who will enforce fair play and the rules of the game, but will never give a boy up until the last expedient has been tried. The older girls who are usually not considered at all, need the influence of trained, enthusiastic, college women who will be able to give them ideals of self-reliance, self-restraint and social co-operation.

If we cannot supply all these leaders for a single playground, we should not lessen its value for the groups of children whose wants may be met by including other children who cannot be taken care of. It is better to have only a little children's playground, or one solely for boys or girls, as the case may be, and make its influence felt. Boys and girls over ten years of age should not be encouraged to mingle on the playground except under the most careful supervision and at exceptional times. Their games can be much better developed when they are in the different groups. The play leader from this time should be of their own sex. The combination of a little children's playground with that

of the older sisters who are responsible for them, is frequently necessary, but it is most unfair and ineffectual to give the two groups the same treatment, or to expect one woman to divide her attention between basket-ball and kindergarten games. Through organization and co-operation among the children, a director's influence can be extended over a wide area, but this can be secured only when the children feel the director's personal interest and her identification with their activities. If she is distracted by conflicting duties, she cannot develop a social spirit in the playground; she can work only with units or small unrelated groups.

The class of children of which we have been speaking—children who fail to "measure up" to our standard of American childhood and who seem likely to fall still farther from the standard of American manhood and womanhood, has become dangerously large in our country to-day. Wholesale immigration from countries having lower standards of living has contributed much of the original material, but the conditions of the immigrant's life after coming here are the really potent factors in creating this tendency to degeneration. Investigation has shown that, while some children have improved in physique and mental activity by transplanting, others have become stunted in both mind and body. This has been notably true of Italian peasants who have always lived an out-of-door life, and who suffer marked deterioration from overcrowding and from the artificial limitations of city life.

This great, careless, self-satisfied country of ours is being aroused to consciousness of the fact that it is no longer the paradise of the poor as well as the promised land of the oppressed. Our time-worn democratic policy of "letting alone" has been sadly overworked in every direction, but it is no longer even respectable when applied to children. The playground idea is a mighty protest against the flagrant inequalities of opportunity for those who are too young to appreciate their theoretical equality and freedom. Let us not repeat the errors of yesterday by expecting results without means to secure them, efficiency without training or success without carefulness.

These children are subnormal, but not abnormal; they are neither vicious nor degenerate in any way; they need only a fair chance to become Americans of whom we may be proud. The playground is not the only thing needed to check the present

appalling waste of childhood, but it can help and supplement all other efforts, and it has a peculiar advantage. In other attempts at social betterment the agency necessarily works from the outside, and the initiative of those who are helped becomes at best a secondary cause; while the playground gives only that which is the right of every child—freedom and leadership. The child owes no man anything but to become a man, and that he sets about doing as promptly as possible. When we provide the right play directors and do not give them too many problems at once, they soon discover the varied phases of the play life of a child. They see that it does not consist merely in romping or in games. The child rejoices in overcoming obstacles and in testing its strength and skill by difficult feats. Its creative energy finds expression in sand or clay or wood or raffia, and its dramatic instinct repeats adult life in a hundred ways.

To open a playground is to start a life process or to discover a new continent. Those who have entered the field with reluctance and a quizzical scepticism, have soon fallen under its fascination and will not leave the children's world for any other vocation. As they see the eagerness, the responsiveness and the rapid development of their charges, they realize, with humility, that they are sharing in the wonderful work which Charles Kingsley says that Mother Carey is doing at the other end of nowhere. They are not making things but making things make themselves.